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Kost, Joelle

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Aesthetics in the Chromogenic Color Film of the 1970s

Joëlle Kost

Brooklyn, 1971. The car slowly circles the block, disappearing from view, then reappearing. Steam rises through manhole covers; the lighting is sparse. Two detectives are observing the scene. They wait, then make their move. Shaky handheld camera, screaming, flickering red police lights in the pale night sky. Desaturated, bluish-gray, documentary-like images set the mood. The thriller THE FRENCH CONNECTION (William Friedkin, USA 1971) presents the New York of the 1970s in a raw and unpolished way. It offers an image of its time.

→ Fig. 1

American film production of this period is distinguished by great changes on the aesthetic, technical, and institutional levels. For more than twenty years, chromogenic multilayer color film had been the leading color film process on the market.[1] Fundamental technical hurdles had been overcome, and various manufacturers specializing in this process were competing with one another, while its technical perfection was being constantly advanced. One central concern was increasing light sensitivity. Considerable successes had already been achieved toward the end of the 1960s. In parallel with this, lighting styles and the self-conception of directors and camera operators were also changing.

Package-Unit System and New Hollywood

With the rise of television in the 1950s, a crisis began in Hollywood. As early as 1948, the Paramount Decree had resulted in the studios separating production and distribution. In its wake, the structure of studios changed greatly. The vertically integrated studio system, whereby the entire conception and distribution of a feature film were concentrated in the hands of one studio, was replaced by the "package-unit system": independent producers put together individual film projects, including the screenplay, filming locations, and a qualified crew. Great value was placed on personal style. At the same time, there was a generational shift among directors. This resulted in new artistic freedoms and a more decisive engagement with the aesthetics of films. The new generation broke with traditional narrative structures, violated conventions of genre, and relied on introverted and troubled protag-

onists. They also espoused a new realism. Grainy images, desaturated colors, lens flares, and natural light were intended to break with the perfection of the previous years. The representatives of the New Hollywood found inspiration in the French Nouvelle Vague, which had transformed the language of film in Europe back in the 1950s and given the director the status of an auteur.

Changing Lighting Styles

Already in the 1950s, filming locations were occasionally shifted from the studio to real places. This trend increased over the subsequent decade. Films such as THE FRENCH CONNECTION and THE GODFATHER (Francis Ford Coppola, USA 1972) were shot almost exclusively on location. The cameramen Owen Roizman and Gordon Willis believed it was important that locations not be altered by too much additional lighting. Existing light was usually supplemented only to the extent the film stock required it—very much in keeping with the slogan "Less is more," or, as Willis expressed it, "See what you're looking at. Don't walk into a situation and re-manipulate it. Look at it!"[2]

Especially dark scenes were lit only sparsely. Such low-key lighting had been a familiar schema since the days of silent film, but it changed in the 1970s. Low-key lighting is distinguished by the lack of a dominant key light; the main lighting is distributed among a few light sources. Large sections of the image fall into darkness. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s, despite dark lighting design, the background of the scenes could usually be made out and the faces were easily recognizable, in the years that followed more and more sections of the image were so weakly lit that no details were visible at all. Deep black surrounded the—often only partially—lit faces. The camera moved ever closer to the protagonists. This phenomenon, which is frequently observed in Technicolor films, now also occurred in chromogenic color films.

→ Fig. 2

A reduction of colorfulness can be observed in the use of colored light sources. Into the 1960s, the use of colored light was almost always diegetically motivated (that is, determined by the narrated world of the film), used, for example, to underscore certain milieus or times of day or as part of the external visualization of the emotions of characters—also known as mood lighting.[3] The use of both a milieu-related colored light setting and of mood lighting can also be found prior to the 1970s, but a new phenomenon came into play: an expressive increase in seemingly natural color schemes. In scenes in which warm light sources such as candles, fire, or orange artificial light were employed, the tonality of the light source in question was used directly for the entire scenes. In THE GODFATHER, Willis even chose to use these warm tones throughout the film. He used various chocolate-colored filters in nuanced ways depending on the venue: broken browns for New York and intense, gentle shades of brown for Sicily. The work with colored light sources was adapted to the general use of existing lights. Mixed light situations were integrated directly into the aesthetic of the film—for example, when shooting a subway scene in THE FRENCH CONNECTION.

→ Figs. 3+4

Where the use of colored lights is concerned, European filmmakers were in general more experimental than their American colleagues. For example, in IL CONFORMISTA (THE CONFORMIST, Bernardo Bertolucci, ITA 1970) the cameraman Vittorio Storaro made the outdoor scenes at night deep blue, whereas the rest of the film is quite naturalistic. Roizman, by contrast, stuck to pale shades of blue in his night shots. With his use of strong color, Storaro was taking up a convention from the silent film era that seems out of place in the context of the 1970s. The tradition of using shades of blue for night scenes derived from early difficulties with shooting at night and with little light, so that scenes had to be shot during the day and then colored blue to simulate a nocturnal atmosphere. This motivation no longer existed in Storaro's case, so his stylistic decision must rather be interpreted as the expression of an individual style, which suited the new self-image of camera operators at the time. Colored light is an especially apt stylistic means of individual expression and a way of distinguishing oneself from conventions.

Technical Pillars

These aesthetic patterns were made possible by, among other things, developments to the sensitivity of the film stock. In the late 1960s, the sensitivity of 35 mm film increased from 50 to 100 EI (Exposure Index). Eastman Kodak released Eastman Color Negative 5254 in 1968, and Fuji Photo Film Co., Ltd., followed a year later with Fujicolor Negative, Type 8515.[4] Eastman Kodak had managed to double the sensitivity of its new negative without sacrificing sharpness or color reproduction; accordingly, it was widely accepted on the film market. This film stock was especially appreciated for its tolerance and reproduction

of skin tones. For a long time, sensitivity remained at 100 EI; then in the early 1980s it increased in just a short period by five times to 500 EI. This was due to, among other things, new silver halides, the highly sensitive T-grains that Eastman Kodak first used in its Kodacolor VR 1000 Color Film and then implemented a year later in its film stock. In the meantime, filmmakers made use of so-called push processing. The film stock was deliberately underexposed during filming and then overexposed while being developed in the laboratory. This made it possible to extend the range of lighting, but at the cost of grain size, color saturation, and sharpness. These aspects, which at first glance seem like flaws, were explicitly used for artistic purposes, as THE FRENCH CONNECTION shows.

The film stock, the illumination, and the lenses are together responsible for the light control. The urge to increase mobility could only be satisfied by developing small, lighter lighting systems. In the mid-1970s, moreover, higher-speed lenses were developed that allowed camera operators to open the aperture wider, giving them more light. Roizman was still filming with an aperture of f2.3, but now twice as much light was available with apertures of f1.3 to f1.5. Using a special lens of f0.7, Stanley Kubrick even had the opportunity to shoot scenes for BARRY LYNDON (GBR 1975) with only candlelight and reflectors on the ceiling—a good example of how the palette of possibilities for filmmakers was visibly expanding.

New Possibilities

This new diversity available to filmmakers of the 1970s—thanks to the interplay of technical innovations, institutional change, and cultural influences—provided the foundation for films like THE FRENCH CONNECTION. A shift away from Hollywood norms made it possible to integrate elements of documentary style into the film. The grainy images derive from the director's personal preference; the desaturated look corresponds to the general taste of the 1970s. It was a film that perfectly captured the spirit of the period.

1. See Barbara Flueckiger's text in this volume, "Film Colors: Materiality, Technique, Aesthetics," 17–49.
2. Gregg Steele, "On Location with The Godfather," in *American Cinematographer* 53, no. 6 (1971): 568–71.
3. See Flueckiger, "Film Colors" (see n. 1).
4. An increase in sensitivity to 100 EI and more had been achieved in small-format film stock and reversal film as early as the mid-1960s. Because film stocks of the negative-positive process were central to professional film production, however, we focus here on 35 mm film.

Fig. 1 THE FRENCH CONNECTION (William Friedkin, USA 1971). Screenshot of the Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment DVD, 2003

Fig. 2 THE FRENCH CONNECTION (William Friedkin, USA 1971).
Screenshot of the Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment DVD, 2003

Fig. 3 Scene from THE GODFATHER (Francis Ford Coppola, USA 1972) set in New York. Technicolor No. V, dye-transfer print, acetate film, 35 mm. Credit: Library of Congress. Photo: Joëlle Kost

Fig. 4 Scene from THE GODFATHER (Francis Ford Coppola, USA 1972) set in Sicily. Technicolor No. V, dye-transfer print, acetate film, 35 mm. Credit: Library of Congress. Photo: Joëlle Kost

Barbara Kasten, *Architectural Sites*. Cibachrome prints

177–78 *Architectural Site 19, Pavilion for Japanese Art LACMA, Los Angeles, CA, July 19, 1989*, 152.4 × 127 cm. Credit: Barbara Kasten / Kadel Willborn, Düsseldorf. *Architectural Site 17, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, August 29, 1988*, 127 × 152.4 cm.
Credit: Barbara Kasten / Kadel Willborn, Düsseldorf

184–85 *Architectural Site 15, Whitney Museum of American Art, October 19, 1987*, 152.4 × 127 cm. Credit: Barbara Kasten / Philara Collection, Düsseldorf. *Architectural Site 10, Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, December 22, 1986*, 152.4 × 127 cm.
Credit: Barbara Kasten / Kadel Willborn, Düsseldorf

Color Floating in Space

Barbara Kasten's *Architectural Sites*

Mona Schubert

"As I walked into the cool quiet of the interior, swatches of color floated in space, changing shape as they landed on surfaces of different textures. These focused planes of colored light radiated out of the building's irregularly shaped stained-glass apertures, playfully piercing through the soft ambient light that emanated from the clerestory."[1]

The US American artist Barbara Kasten wrote these lines about her visit to Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, France, which provided an early stimulus to her artistic practice. The interplay of space, colored light, and materiality described so vividly by Kasten forms the starting point and foundation of her oeuvre. Since the 1980s, she has been creating multilayered installations in her Chicago studio, consisting of colored Plexiglas, mirrors, metal, and geometrical forms, which she illuminates from various angles and then photographs. One of her key influences is Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy, whose work she encountered while living in Germany in the 1960s. There are clear parallels between Kasten's art and the installations of colored materials that Moholy-Nagy photographed in the 1930s.[2] Both focus in stylistic terms on artistic means such as sheen, reflection, projection, and transparency, as well as spatial illusion amplified by a carefully crafted distribution of light and shadow.

Kasten's sixteen-part photo series *Architectural Sites* (1986–1990) can be regarded as an extension of her studio settings. The images were originally commissioned by the US lifestyle magazine *Vanity Fair* to accompany an—ultimately unpublished—article discussing financial and cultural centers as the secular cathedrals of our age. Kasten uses the visual tools she had tested out in her studio work—color projection and reflection—to produce elaborately staged images of icons of American postmodernist architecture with their opulent foyers and high-ceilinged atria. This shift from the studio into the much larger dimensions of public space necessitated an expansion of the entire production setup, coordinated by a team that included everything from security guards to professional movie lighting technicians.[3] Limited accessibility to the space meant that the photographs of the institutions